

How Conceptions of Exceptionalism and Tokenism Present Themselves in the Refugee Crisis and *Welcome to Germany* (2016)

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Introduction

Since around 2015, Germany and other European countries have experienced a large increase in the number of refugees²¹ entering their countries. As a result, there has been much pushback from native Germans against this new foreign presence; recent terrorist attacks carried out by radical Islamists throughout Europe have only made Europeans more skeptical of allowing refugees in their countries²². Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel has been especially criticized for her open-door policy. Last year, she and Interior Minister Horst Seehofer have clashed heavily on the issue of migration and refugees, threatening the already fragile government coalition²³. However, more recently, Germany has decreased the number of refugees accepted while increasing deportations to other EU countries²⁴. While the number of refugees is showing no signs of decreasing to pre-2015 numbers in the near future, Germany and other European countries are coming to terms with the fact that they must not only offer refuge but also successfully accommodate these refugees. Current discussions of the refugee crisis frame it as a new phenomenon, but these discussions ignore other influxes of refugees in Germany's past²⁵. It would be beneficial for German politicians to also reference what they have done in the past when they are looking at how they should approach this "crisis". The issue of integration and assimilation has been a salient topic in recent discussions surrounding refugees. On one hand, many Germans expect the newly arrived refugees to fully assimilate to their customs, but many refugees are not willing to completely forfeit their own culture for Germany's. In contrast to earlier times of refugee migration, these refugees are coming from places whose cultures are viewed as antithetical to German and European culture.

In this essay, I will investigate how German society approaches the question of assimilation/integration through an analysis of the mainstream media representation of refugees in *Welcome to Germany*. I will show how the unidimensional and shallow character of the refugee in this film is indicative of a German society that is unwilling to accept refugees as fully human with

²¹ In this paper, I will use a common, broad definition of a refugee: anyone who is fleeing from their homeland because of persecution, which keeps them from being able to return.

²² For example, the March 2019 Utrecht shootings in the Netherlands, December 2018 Strasbourg attack in France, August 2017 Barcelona attacks, May 2017 Manchester bombing in the United Kingdom, July 2016 Nice attack in France, December 2015 Cologne attacks in Germany, and November 2015 Paris attacks.

²³ Schmidt, Nadine, and Judith Vonberg. "Merkel Makes Deal with Interior Minister on Migration Dispute." CNN. July 02, 2018. Accessed March 24, 2019.
<http://www.cnn.com/2018/07/02/europe/merkel-seehofer-government-intl/index.html>.

²⁴ Shubert, Atika, and Nadine Schmidt. "Germany Rolls up Refugee Welcome Mat to Face off Right-wing Threat." CNN. January 27, 2019. Accessed March 24, 2019.
<https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/26/europe/germany-refugee-deportations-intl/index.html>.

²⁵ Pouturus, Patrice. "Refugee Reports." Migration, Memory, and Diversity, edited by Cornelia Wilhelm, Berghahn Books, 2017, 86-107.; El-Tayeb, Fatima. *Undeutsch: Die Konstruktion Des Anderen in Der Postmigrantischen Gesellschaft*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016.

complexities and faults. *Welcome to Germany* is a popular German film centering around a family's decision to adopt a Nigerian refugee named Diallo that promotes a narrative that is counteractive to progressive work surrounding the political and social treatment of refugees in the country. I will analyze how Diallo's role in the movie and his relation to the Hartmanns, the family that takes him in, contribute to a more close-minded view of refugees. I will also put this into the context of the film's relative success in Germany and how the movie was received by the public.

Anti-Blackness within the Refugee Crisis

The majority of news coverage and media portrayals of the refugee crisis in Germany feature Syrian refugees, but these portrayals do not give a complete view of the demographics of the crisis. Although Syrian refugees do make up a large portion of the German refugee population in recent years, there is also a sizeable number of African refugees in Germany. For example, Eritrean, Nigerian, and Somali refugees constitute the three largest percentages of African refugees²⁶. Nigerian refugees, usually fleeing from attacks carried out by the Islamic terrorist group Boko Haram, made up 7% (6,141 refugees) of the refugee population that came to Germany in the first half of 2018. Eritrean refugees, who are fleeing from compulsory conscription in the national military, made up 4.3% (3,722) of refugees²⁷. Additionally, Somali refugees escaping inter-country warfare made up 3.5% (3,260) of refugees. In contrast, Syrian refugees made up 26.4% of the refugee population in the first half of 2018, a marked decrease from previous years^{28 29}. Despite their lack of representation, African refugees make up a significant amount of the refugee population in Germany.

In addition to facing Islamophobia and xenophobia, African refugees must endure anti-Black racism in Germany. This racism is not solely present in the social context. Rather, it exists throughout the German political system, particularly in local German police forces. In her book *Undeutsch*, Fatima El-Tayeb details specific infractions against African refugees by German police. In one instance, a police officer forced an African refugee to get naked, pushed him into a cell, and sprayed tear gas into the cell. Another group of police officers staged a mock execution of an African refugee in which one officer pressed his gun into the refugee's temple while another officer fired a shot into the air³⁰. Although Germany prefers not to recognize the conception of race, because the term "race" is associated with the racist policies of the Third Reich, it cannot ignore the effects and prevalence of racism in its country³¹.

²⁶ In the first half of 2018, Nigerians made up 26.3% of African refugees; Eritreans made up 16% of African refugees; and Somalis made up 14% of African refugees.

²⁷ The exact reason that refugees are fleeing Eritrea is unclear because there are many conflicting accounts about the situation in the country. Some say that the government is repressive while others claim that refugees are promoting a false narrative about the country and its leader in order to be granted refugee status (Smith).

²⁸ In the first half of 2016, Syrian refugees made up 44% of the refugee population.

²⁹ "Asylzahlen." Bundesamt Für Migration Und Flüchtlinge. June 02, 2017. Accessed March 24, 2019. <http://www.bamf.de/DE/Infothek/Statistiken/Asylzahlen/asylzahlen-node.html>.

³⁰ El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 214.

³¹ Fehrenbach, Heide. *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Amnesty International recently produced a report criticizing Germany and Europe for widespread anti-black racism present within their country³². As El-Tayeb states, Germans still perceive black people as "fundamentally biologically different from 'normal' people"³³. Could this be the reason for the lack of inclusion of African refugees in media portrayals of the refugee crisis? It would be dangerous to discount the violence that Syrian refugees face due to xenophobia and Islamophobia, but it would also be unwise to ignore the violence that African immigrants face due to the combination of xenophobia, Islamophobia, and anti-Blackness.

In light of this troubling sociohistorical context, I have chosen to focus on how film treats this topic because one cannot discount the potential media representations can have for giving refugees some legitimacy to their claims to refugee status. Films, even when fictional, can heavily shape someone's knowledge about a historical event especially if they knew little about the event beforehand. In terms of the refugee crisis, most Germans have not had extended amounts of personal contact with a refugee. Therefore, a film about a refugee will have a large influence on shaping Germans' perceptions of refugees. In their paper about media discourse on the refugee crisis, Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti emphasize the role that media has in influencing society and hold that "media [can] contribute to the reproduction of stereotypes"³⁴. When audiences see stereotypes being reinforced in characters, they believe those stereotypes to be true. Even though it is not clear to what extent film and media can affect audience opinions on issues, evidence shows that film does exert some influence. With this in mind, we must seriously consider and analyze the portrayals and stories that we see in film and how the lack of representation of African refugees in German media could be responsible for less acceptance to African claims to refugee status as legitimate. However, just having these portrayals of African refugees in the media is not enough; we must further consider what they contain and interrogate what these portrayals mean.

White Savior Film

The film, *Welcome to Germany* (2016), directed by white German director Simon Verhoeven, presents the character Diallo as one of those aforementioned "exceptions." In contrast to the majority of media coverage, he is an African refugee, but his character is essentially domesticated and made docile, embodying Germany's ideal refugee: he is more than willing to fully assimilate to German culture and work to earn his way. The film begins with a despondent Mrs. Hartmann who, since entering retirement, has become bored with her life and is looking for a way to shake things up. After Mrs. Hartmann declares that she wishes to take in a refugee, the upper-class bourgeois Hartmann family fosters Diallo, a Nigerian refugee hoping to be granted asylum by the German state. In addition, Diallo works to fix the Hartmann's familial issues while the Hartmanns teach him Western values that seem new to him due to his upbringing in a small Nigerian village. Diallo's chances for asylum are threatened by several situations he gets into because of the Hartmann family, such as a house party that results in a visit from the police and a rap video that grandson Basti films at school using Diallo, and several scantily clad women, as extras. But in the end, the Hartmann family is instrumental in him being granted asylum. Throughout the film, Diallo

³² El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 215.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Fotopoulos, Stergios, and Margarita Kaimaklioti. "Media Discourse on the Refugee Crisis: On What Have the Greek, German and British Press Focused?" *European View* 15, no. 2 (2016): 265-79. doi:10.1007/s12290-016-0407-5.

is pushed further and further away from the center of the movie as the family's problems take over more of the plot. Due to this marginalization, the film becomes less about the issues that refugees face in Germany and more about solving the problems within the Hartmann family.

Welcome to Germany functions as a typical "white savior film"³⁵. White savior films usually include a benevolent white protagonist whose main goal throughout the film is to aide a poor and/or helpless minority. Additionally, these films work to support a narrative that people of color must rely on white people to help them out of their dire situations. Another issue with these movies is that they often ignore structural causes of racism and name one bad white person or a group of bad white people as the cause of the racism that the person of color faces, allowing the audience watching the film to feel absolved of any racist guilt, even while they remain complicit in racist structures³⁶. In *Welcome to Germany*, the Hartmanns, specifically Mrs. Hartmann and her daughter Sophie, function as the white saviors; they are the benevolent Germans eager to deliver a refugee from his suffering. By taking Diallo in from the refugee center, they are bringing him into much better living circumstances and even removing him from the racism and danger he faced at the center. Diallo repays them by working tirelessly to help Mrs. Hartmann with handyman projects around the house. In the end, the Hartmanns help Diallo obtain his refugee status by testifying before court to his character and all that he has done for them. In actuality, one family's emotional testimony would not be enough to convince the German government to grant someone refugee status, especially because of strict regulations such as Dublin II³⁷ ³⁸. But *Welcome to Germany* does not do much to address the real issues that refugees face in the country. Instead, it feeds into Germans' white savior complex by showing a story where Germans open up their home to an immensely grateful refugee.

This film is not about Diallo and his experiences as a refugee, rather it is about Germans and Germany. The Hartmann family can be seen as a representation of Germany as a whole; this metaphorical connection is more apparent when looking at the difference in the English and German titles of the movie: the German title, *Willkommen bei den Hartmanns*, directly translates to "Welcome to the Hartmanns", contrasting the more ambiguous English title, *Welcome to Germany*. It is worth noting that one of the posters that was marketed for the film features the names of the actors for all the main characters except for the man who plays Diallo, Eric Kabongo. Diallo lacks complex characterization and shows no development throughout the film, illuminating the fact that he occupies a supplemental rather than central role in the film. For instance, Diallo's identification as Muslim is barely mentioned in the movie. Furthermore, Diallo's character has no remnants of Nigerian culture. The only time he mentions life at home is when he explains how Boko Haram destroyed his village and killed his family. One might expect a film that hopes to truly be progressive on the refugee issue would show aspects of both cultures instead of just focusing on a refugee attempting to embrace only German culture. If the Hartmanns are a metaphor

³⁵ Hughey, Matthew W. *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014.

³⁶ Hughey, *The White Savior Film*, 167.

³⁷ The Dublin II law states that refugees must apply for refugee status in the country in which they first entered.

³⁸ United Nations. "EU Urged to Revise Its Dublin II Regulation in Order to Protect the Rights of Refugees and Asylum-seekers." UNHCR. Accessed March 24, 2019. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2006/4/446c83b52/eu-urged-revise-its-dublin-ii-regulation-order-protect-rights-refugees.html>.

for the country as a whole, the movie shows the extent to which Germany expects refugees to do both physical and emotional labor in exchange for a chance at refuge in Germany.

A film centering around a family instead of the refugee can do little in advancing the discussion on how refugees are treated. Rather than concentrating on what problems refugees face upon arrival in Germany, *Welcome to Germany* focuses its discussions around how the country is coming to terms with itself and attempting to define its identity among this new influx of foreigners. The characters in the film offer conflicting answers to questions as to what Germany should do next and the film itself fails to take a solid position on the issue of refugees and how they should be treated in Germany.

Typically, white savior films contain either one or a few white villains on which the blame for racism is placed. In this film, there are two main villains: one that threatens Germans and the other that threatens refugees. Diverging from the trend of white villains, the villain threatening Germany is represented through the Muslim character Rayhan, the refugee revealed to be a terrorist at the end of the movie. On the other hand, the villains threatening refugees are a group of neo-Nazi protesters who gather outside the Hartmann house to protest Diallo's presence. Rayhan's character is consistently shown as being vehemently opposed to both Germany and assimilating to German culture. His role in the movie implies that Germans should be suspicious of any refugees who seem unwilling to assimilate to German culture. In contrast to Rayhan, the neo-Nazi protesters do not represent a serious threat. Even though they surround the house with torches and posters, they are presented as comical, diminishing and invalidating the dangers to which refugees and other minorities are exposed in Germany. The absurdity of the protestors outside detracts from the real dangers that refugees and minorities face and paints the source of racism and xenophobia in Germany as coming from a small number of eccentric Germans. When the protestors do begin to act dangerously (i.e. throwing items through the windows of the house), the family retreats into the house towards safety. Operating with the interpretation that the Hartmann family is a metaphor for Germany, by retreating inside the house and separating themselves from the racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic protesters, the film is saying that these ideals do not belong in Germany. The film once again underestimates the role of racists and racism in German society when it writes off Mr. Hartmann's rudeness towards Tarek, a younger doctor played by an actor of Austrian and Tunisian descent, as a product of Mr. Hartmann's disenchantment with the aging process and jealousy of Tarek's youth instead of as a byproduct of his racism. However, this implication that racism is anti-German only provides an ineffective and superficial response to those refugees have been subjected to racism in Germany while ignoring the role that structural racism plays in Germany's treatment of refugees.

Welcome to Germany has won six film awards and been nominated for several others, including a nomination for Best European Comedy at the European Film Awards. Most notably, the film's director, Simon Verhoeven, was awarded the German Cinema Award for Peace at the Munich Film Festival. The award is reserved for films "with a humanist, socially relevant dimension" that aim to "[build] bridges and [inspire] tolerance and humanitarianism"³⁹ ("Awards & Winners"). Although one cannot deny the film's popularity, its acquisition of a peace award highlights the fact that many see the film as progressive. Contrary to the description of the German Cinema Award for Peace, *Welcome to Germany* does nothing to "build bridges". Instead of advocating for a more

³⁹ "Awards & Winners." The German Cinema Award for Peace - The Bridge - Filmfest München. Accessed March 24, 2019. <http://www.filmfest-muenchen.de/en/festival/preise-preistraeger/bernhard-wicki-filmpreis-die-bruecke-der-friedenspreis-des-deutschen-films/>.

accepting outlook on the refugees coming into the country, it only works to examine the different ways in which Germans have responded to the refugee crisis.

Liberalism and Racism

Despite it being marketed as a film providing both comedy and progressive commentary on the refugee issue, *Welcome to Germany* does not actually advocate a position within the issue of the refugee crisis. When characters in the film actually discuss the refugee crisis, their comments are not liberal or progressive; rather they are uncertain and still skeptical of the migrants coming into the country. In my paper, I will define "progressive" an ideal that supports a deviation from traditional ideas and practices through change and reform. Lastly, although in layman's terms "liberal" has come to be defined as progressively antiracist, I will define liberalism as an ideology that advocates for the protection of minorities against the "abuse of an overbearing state."⁴⁰ While the film attempts to advocate a portrait of Germans as generally accepting of refugees, it actually demonstrates that Germans are only open to these exemplary migrants. In an interview, the director, Simon Verhoeven, praises his film for treating the migration crisis with "dignity and emotion...[and] in a humanistic way". Furthermore, in addressing the issue of Islam in the movie he claims that the movie attempts to question "certain conservative aspects of Islam."⁴¹ Although it would be irresponsible to discount the conservative aspects of Islam, the film only shows the negative aspects of Islam. Diallo is Muslim, but this character trait is barely explored in the film.

The film's conflicting ideas surrounding the role of Muslims and Islam in Germany are presented through the lack of multifaceted representations of Islam. In particular, the film has multiple instances where German fear and suspicion of Muslims is validated. Recounting a night out in Cologne to her mother, Sophie explains how she was almost attacked by a group of Middle Eastern men but saved by a taxi driver. When asked by her mother, Sophie states that she is not sure whether or not they were refugees. Mrs. Hartmann is immediately suspicious that these men who attacked her daughter were refugees, highlighting her overall mistrust of refugees. Furthermore, Sophie's story could be a reference to the New Year's attacks in Cologne in 2015 where approximately 80 women were attacked by groups of male refugees totaling close to 1,000.⁴² In addition, Mrs. Hartmann, who is portrayed as more tolerant and accepting, has a vivid nightmare about the Islamic State taking over Germany, which equates Muslims and their presence in Germany as threatening. In her dream, Ms. Hartmann is barred from entering her local bakery because she is not wearing a burka; the baker and his staff are wearing long beards and burkas while speaking in a Bavarian dialect. Her dream shows that she believes that the Muslims entering the country will disrupt the German way of life by refusing to assimilate into German culture and instead forcefully pushing their culture onto the native German populace. Furthermore, her nightmare highlights a xenophobic suspicion that many of the refugees are secretly members of ISIS attempting to infiltrate the country. Throughout the film, Diallo is suspected by police of being a member of an ISIS terrorist cell. However, it is revealed at the end of the film that the real culprit was Rayhan. Scenes like these just mentioned validate German fear and uneasiness

⁴⁰ Losurdo, Domenico. *Liberalism: A Counter-history*. London: Verso, 2014, 2.

⁴¹ "EFA 2017- Interview with Simon Verhoeven." European Film Awards. March 9, 2018.

Accessed March 24, 2019. http://www.europeanfilmawards.eu/en_EN/efa-2017-interview-with-simon-verhoeven.

⁴² "Germany Shocked by Cologne New Year Gang Assaults on Women." BBC News. January 05, 2016. Accessed March 24, 2019. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35231046>.

surrounding the admission of Muslim refugees. Instead of exhibiting openly Muslim characters occupying positive roles, the film capitalizes on the negative stigma surrounding Middle Eastern Muslim refugees, ostracizing them from German society and making the existence of someone who is both Muslim and German seem impossible. The portrayal of Islam in the film also brings up the discussion of the good refugee versus the bad refugee. Rayhan, a refugee living in the refugee center who is revealed to be a terrorist at the end of the film, is against assimilating to German customs and refuses to renounce his “traditional” ideas. For example, the director of the refugee center mentions that Rayhan tries to keep the women from enrolling in classes at the refugee home. Diallo, on the other hand, is eager to assimilate to German culture and considers himself indebted to the country.

Conclusion

Welcome to Germany shows how including a representation of a migrant that is not necessarily bad does not make that representation helpful to achieving a general approval of migrants. In order to push the discussion forward and encourage greater acceptance, migrants must be portrayed as complex and diverse and deserving of equal and just treatment regardless of their flaws. Representations like that of Diallo and Mamoudou Gassama shield Europeans from the reality of the situation and give unrealistic expectations of refugees; not every asylum seeker will be able to save toddlers dangling from buildings or have Diallo’s perfect attitude. Both of these instances demonstrate the fact that Europeans are not completely open to accepting these refugees as humans who are attempting to flee a life-threatening situation and are in need of shelter. Instead, they see them as a threat to their security and economic wellbeing. Although Gassama and Diallo are both deserving of the statuses that they were granted, every migrant cannot be expected to meet such high standards in order to have a valid claim to residency. Viewing migrants through such an unrealistic lens decreases the likelihood of an understanding between Europeans and these newly arrived migrants since Europeans will most likely never encounter these perfect examples of migrants. Furthermore, Europeans are then unwilling to accept any flaws in these migrants that they do encounter. Films that negatively influence an audience’s opinion are dangerous to those hoping to advocate a more progressive agenda. Such representations do not work to improve the systematic treatment of migrants.

Far from progressive, the racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic undertones of the movie illustrate that Germany has still not moved forward from the more racist and close-minded ideas of its past. Rather than advocating for a more accepting and open outlook towards the refugee crisis, *Welcome to Germany* validates Germany’s fear and suspicion of the migrants entering the country. Through the genre of comedy, the film evades any discussion of the violence associated with racism and xenophobia and instead invites the German audience to laugh at Diallo’s backwardness⁴³ (Malik).

⁴³ Malik, Sarita. *Representing Black Britain: Black Images on British Television from 1936 to the Present Day*. Open University, 1998.